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ABSTRACT

A broad scientific perspective that recognizes the child's social environment is needed in school psychology practice. The chances of influencing change expand when psychologists switch from an intrapsychic model to a social systems (group process) framework for testing referrals. Intrapsychic explanations create a mechanism for educators to avoid change because they locate the problem within an individual, which leads to over-referrals for assessment and over-emphasis on the child as the problem. Misbehavior may not be a symptom of psychopathology, but a function of the child's adaptation to the particular system. Observing behavior outside the testing room increases understanding of the interpersonal context in which the behavior is taking place. Adding standardized testing and observation together, the number and variety of possible intervention strategies is increased. Experience with shifting the focus of a multidisciplinary, pupil-services team away from individual assessment and in the direction of assessment of the child's functioning in context is presented. The reframing technique is described, and changes in the response of the team utilizing a systems perspective to test and place referrals are reported. Hope is increased when children's difficulties are assessed in terms of the social environment. (Contains 13 references.) (EMK)

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ABSTRACT

**"It's not my problem!**

**Reframing test and place referrals into systemic interventions**

By Ned Engel and Peter Faustino

Briarcliff Manor Public Schools

As school psychologists, most of us have been faced with the dilemma of over-referral for psychoeducational assessment. An alternative to "WISCing Kids to death" can be achieved by utilizing a systems perspective. A multi-disciplinary pupil services team could respond to test and place referrals by encouraging teachers to think differently about problems. The focus of the assessment could be on the context or group as opposed to the individual. Several years ago, this process of change was initiated at a public school in New York.

To engage cooperation, we began with in-service training to explain an ecological systems paradigm; we demonstrated how this perspective can be useful in understanding classroom dynamics and management. This framework encouraged a broad conceptualization of problems and facilitated "hopeful," solution-focused thinking because it allowed teachers to see variables that were within their power to change. The school staff realized that a student's behavioral difficulties are triggered by different contexts, including the school environment. They began to give different (less pathological) explanations to behavior and made more requests for consultation, but fewer requests for testing. Conference participants will learn how to use this model for consultation and in-service training.

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"It's not my problem!"

Reframing test and place referrals into systemic interventions

By Ned Engel and Peter Faustino

As school psychologists, most of us have been faced with the dilemma of over-referral for psychoeducational assessment. Fortunately recent changes in the policy of the U.S. Dept. of Education no longer require automatic repeating of each test (Dwyer, 1994). But what about mainstream referrals?

We, as educators, need a broad scientific perspective which recognizes the child's social environment. We can think about our schools and classrooms as ecosystems. Rhodes (1969) hypothesized that it is meaningless to discuss problems of behavior in isolation from the systems or contexts in which those problems arise, since it is these very contexts (i.e. classrooms) which define the behavior as disturbing in the first place. Misbehavior may not be a symptom of psychopathology, but a function of one's adaptation to a particular system.

By utilizing a systems perspective, a multi-disciplinary pupil services team could respond differently to test and place referrals. The focus of assessment could be on the context or group as opposed to the individual. Why cling to outdated ways of thinking? The "rights without labels" position of the National Association of School Psychologists can only become a reality if multi-disciplinary teams examine relationships within the classroom ecology rather than adapt a quick fix mentality and go for the easy, albeit costly, solution of special education placement.

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The first step might be to recognize that words create meaning. For example, if your school calls its multi-disciplinary group a "child study team," consider changing the title. Who or what needs assessment - is it the individual, the classroom group, the curriculum, the school climate or the teaching methods? The child is only one part of the school ecology; focusing exclusively on individuals neglects the classroom environment which may need diagnosis and intervention. The designation of "child study" leads parents and teachers to view a child as an identified patient - a classification which is inherently stigmatizing and can inhibit finding a solution.

This may be difficult to initiate, especially if the team overly depends on linear thinking to understand the problems of children. A systemic viewpoint implies a circular rather than linear process of causality, and recognizes that one can intervene with groups not just individuals.

**Where to Begin:**

Two years ago, this process of change was initiated at my school with a series of questions and statements raised at our child study team, whose members included reading and math specialists, school nurse, speech pathologist, director of special ed and building principal. (This committee has since been renamed the Multi-Disciplinary Consultation Team or MCT.) I asked, Is it practical to continue to use an individual client model when we have grown from a school of 450 to 770 students,

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approximately a 60 percent increase? I suggested that the team could rethink our approach when we are asked about a student. We could take a much closer look at the context without rushing in to do academic, language or psychological testing.

I encouraged the team to redirect our service delivery to focus on the systems issues which could be fueling the referrals. Perhaps we were already doing this. I told them it is probably more beneficial to look at each situation from the point of view of what is going right. Think about what has worked in the past. When is the problem less of a problem? How did the student do that? What were you doing in the classroom?

The principal said, "What does our school need? How do we utilize the talent we have?" Other specialists added, "What is it that we already have that is good and works? How do we get the staff to adopt a similar perspective? The director of special ed added, "It is a paradigm shift to look at all of these things that impact on children. All of the other variables need to be looked at. We are causing so much of our own difficulty."

Another member added, "How we respond to individual referrals could change. Perhaps more support for teachers is needed. What are the pressures that divert the teachers from the task?"

I then suggested that a parent may see their child's success or failure in school as a reflection of the family's competency. Realizing this, I asked the group what happens when a teacher

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calls a parent and says, "I have referred your son to the Child Study Team." Wouldn't it be easier to say you are conferring with a Multi-Disciplinary Consultation Team? What would happen at a MCT meeting if a related arts person was present? (The art, phys. ed. or music teacher may not think the kid needs Ritalin!)

Obviously, when we are dealing with a child, we need to think about his environment. I shared the National Association of School Psychologists' position (1985) on advocacy for appropriate educational services to all children with the MCT. It stated "...Psychoeducational needs of children should be determined through a multi-dimensional, non-biased assessment process. This must evaluate the match between the learner and his or her educational environment, assessing the compatibility of curriculum and system as they interact with the child, rather than relying on the deficit based model which places the blame for failure within the child..."

Next we discussed the fact that a teacher is faced with the task of educating a heterogenous group of children whose strengths and weaknesses are as diverse as their individual personalities. As specialists, we are faced with the task of determining and meeting the needs of those children who are not succeeding in a classroom setting.

Often the teacher's desired intervention is removal of the child from the classroom for special education services. Meyers, Parsons, and Martin (1979) have also found this to be the case.

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They noted that many educators view the psychologist as the one who will remove the problem from the classroom, rather than as someone who can help the child succeed in the classroom.

The writer of the referral needs to be part of the focus. To what extent do they (teacher or parent) see themselves as part of the problem or potential solution? What do they wish to change in their relationship with the student being referred? A problem is not solely owned by the referred individual. Conventional thinking directs us to look at what's wrong with the kid, making it easier to cast blame. It would be more productive to look at communication patterns within the school and home. Plas (1987) believes some referrals are better suited for systems work, particularly those in which the referred person is seen by the group as someone who exhibits behaviors that the group experiences as uncomfortable, obnoxious or distancing.

Social psychological researcher Fritz Heider has shown that people are often unaware of their errors in explaining other people's behavior (Myers, 1990). Our preconceived notions shape how we interpret information and thus encourage us to seek only confirmatory data. It is easy to ignore useful information, especially when we have overconfidence in our judgments (Dawes, Faust & Meehl, 1989). In explaining the behavior of others, people often make fundamental attribution errors. They explain a student's behavior based on their guesses about inner traits, motives and attitudes while discounting powerful external

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situational constraints. They underestimate the impact of the situation.

Molnar & Linquist (1987) believe we can move away from mechanistic, pathological models of behavior by recognizing that many interpretations of a given behavior may be true at the same time. To create a positive focus they suggest identifying exceptions, i.e. what am I doing that works with this student. The key to change is being able to see aspects of a context that influence a student's behavior and sharing that viewpoint. Molnar & Linquist (1987) further hypothesize that given a person's interpretation of a situation, he will regard his own behavior as reasonable. If we choose to look at the situation from the student's point of view, we create the possibility of cooperation. Remember, each view given its perspective can be true.

Molnar & Linquist (1987) suggest the following questions: What is the pattern that keeps repeating itself in this situation? How do various people involved perceive this situation? What are positive ways of interpreting the problem behavior? What would be a sign that things are improving? How will this room, playground or school be different when the problem behavior has stopped? What is happening in the situation that I do not want to change? Perhaps these questions could be, or are already, asked at your multi-disciplinary team meetings.

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**How to Begin: In-service Teacher Training:**

Following a discussion with the Multi-Disciplinary Consultation Team, two 90-minute workshops were planned for the staff faculty meetings during the first month of school.

This meeting was co-led by the school psychologist and the superintendent of schools (who at that time was also the acting principal). One week prior to the meeting, the staff was given a brief summary of an ecological/systems paradigm and how it could be useful in viewing classroom dynamics.

During the workshop, we did several group activities, which facilitated participation. The teachers were asked to think about which environments influenced them as children. I drew a circle in the middle of a large piece of easel paper and labeled it "child". Then I drew lines radiating out from all sides of the circle. I gave one example and wrote summer camp on one of the lines. Then I called for volunteers. Some of the responses were library, secret hideout, camp, music lessons, gymnastics, etc. Only two out of 50 people mentioned school. Then I asked the group to discuss what their relationships were in all of these settings.

Following this, we reviewed the basic tenets of a systems perspective which is based on a non-pathological view of human problems. When using a systems perspective, there are certain underlying assumptions, which Kral, 1992, listed. "Human problems result from the pattern of interaction within a system. An

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individual's behavior must be viewed from the context in which it occurs. Children learn within a group setting -- the classroom. Fundamental attribution errors are bound to occur since people are often unaware of their errors in explaining other people's behavior. Very often, children's problems are actually their solutions to situations and relationships. Individuals have within them the necessary resources to resolve their problems. A small change within the system can have large results. The goal of intervention is the solution."

**The Reframing Technique:**

As psychologists, we can be helpful by encouraging educators to think differently about problems. **Reframing** is a tool that anyone within the school setting can use, and quite often already does. Reframing is the principle technique in addressing perceptions. It enables us to think differently about problems. Molnar and Lindquist (1987) use the following example: A teacher regards a student's repeated blurting out of answers during a class as an unreasonable and inappropriate attempt to get attention. The student considers it necessary to blurt out answers because he or she believes that the teacher tends to ignore him or her. The teacher and the student each have their perceptions reinforced when the student blurts out to get the teacher's attention and the teacher determinedly ignores the student in an attempt to discourage the behavior.

The relationship between the behavior of the student and the

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teacher is only a small element in the complex pattern of relationships that constitute the classroom ecosystem. From an ecosystemic perspective, we know that any change in the dynamics between the teacher and the student can influence the classroom ecosystem and vice versa. So how do we encourage constructive change?

One powerful way of promoting change in problematic patterns of behavior is to formulate a positive, alternate explanation of the problem behavior. For the teacher, reframing means finding a new perceptual frame for problem behavior, one that is positive, fits the facts of the situation, and is plausible to the people involved. Reframing will also suggest how to act differently in the problem situation. If the teacher in the example above were able to interpret the student's blurting out answers as intense involvement and interest in his lessons instead of as inappropriate attempts to get attention, then responses other than ignoring the student would suggest themselves.

Hyperactive behavior can be reframed as "busy," "involved," or "widely focused." Depression can be seen as the state of being "overwhelmed." In most problem situations, the participants see things from a negative, pessimistic point of view. By offering a new, positive interpretation of the problem, the teacher creates a fresh perspective and is able to generate new possibilities.

**Engaging Cooperation:**

Change of any kind can be threatening, and is often met with

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resistance. The very act of providing consultative services conveys a message that change is going to occur. Because the goal of consultation is to solve a problem (behavior, attitudinal or social), change is openly expected by the two major participants in regard to the third party (Campbell, 1991).

In the context of school, the need to effectively help students change may imply that teachers or administrators themselves must also change their behavior. Although, this was not clear for everyone initially, they quickly realized that the consultation process involved their perceptions changing to assist students to change.

Some specialists, who were very comfortable in their diagnostic role, and several classroom teachers, who had been reliant on being told what to do, were non-committal at the start. It helped that I co-led the workshops with the superintendent. It was also useful that all educators, including the related arts staff (music, gym, art, computer and the school nurse), were enthusiastic that their input could now be used on a regular basis.

**Follow-Up:**

Teachers began to recognize that a systems/ecological perspective can be useful in developing successful classroom interventions. This systemic framework encourages a broad conceptualization of problems and facilitates "hopeful", solution-focused thinking because it allows teachers to see

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variables that are within their power to change, as opposed to looking at problems as being exclusively caused by factors within the child or home.

Zins and Erchul (1995) have discussed the importance of "collegial support" since teachers can get caught up in the demands of meeting curricular expectations. They note that sometimes teachers function in isolation from their peers. This in turn can occasionally create the situation in which one can get caught up in patterns and not have sufficient time to take stock in what is happening on a regular basis.

These initial workshops encouraged teacher sharing and introduced the idea of a different type of consultation. Durrant (1995) emphasizes the idea that how we see students makes a difference. He has found that the more he focuses on the competence and strengths of his clients, the less he is likely to notice their deficits or pathology.

Our new student referral form includes the following questions: Please describe what behavior causes the most difficulty. (When and where does it occur?) What instructional activity is taking place when this behavior happens? What have you tried that partially works? What have you tried that worked temporarily? What have you tried in similar situations? What is different about the times when things are better? What is the smallest amount of change in the behavior of a student that would let you know this student was improving? When does this already

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happen a little bit for the student? What are some strengths and abilities of this student that might be used as a basis for positive change?

**Systems Change: A Ripple Effect**

Ultimately this intervention helped pave the way for other group consultation efforts. For example: The school staff realized that a student's behavioral difficulties are triggered by different contexts, including the school environment. They began to give different (less pathological) explanations to behavior.

The elementary school had a student council (a leadership training program) which discussed the school climate on a regular basis. Yet, after I demonstrated the reframing technique, the principal expanded this forum by inviting the council delegates to assist him and the teachers in reviewing the school's discipline code; he asked their opinions about their rights and responsibilities. This led to off-campus "constitutional conventions," one at a neighborhood recreation center and one at a university. Each convention involved 48 students, 8 teachers and 5 parents. As a result, the discipline code was rewritten in language kids could understand.

That year, a group of parents approached this psychologist about helping them develop a human relations program. Together with parents, the staff chose a program on social decision making and problem solving.



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**Creating Fresh Perspectives**

Our chances of influencing change will expand when we switch from an intrapsychic model to a social systems (group process) framework. Intrapsychic explanations create a mechanism for educators to avoid change because they locate the problem within an individual. Minor (1972) noted that the element of hope is raised when children's difficulties are assessed in terms of the social environment. If we can observe behavior outside of the testing room, we increase our possible intervention strategies since we can then understand the interpersonal context in which the behavior takes place. This strategy would add to the valuable data gained by administering standardized psychological testing when deemed appropriate by the psychologist.

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